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# From Red to Rainbow

## *The Transformation of the Left—Some Key Intellectual Sources*

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WILLIAM P. BAUMGARTH SR.

“Do you know who James O’Connor is?” I replied that I recognized Dr. O’Connor as a New Left economist, generally known for his book *Fiscal Crisis of the State* (1973). It was 1988, and I was at a party on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. When I mentioned that I was a college professor, my interlocutor reasonably enough, though mistakenly, inferred that I must be on the political left. “Wait while I get something I want you to see.” She returned with a copy of *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Socialist Ecology*, edited by O’Connor. “What do you make of this?” A classical socialist herself, dedicated to the liberation of the working class from the market economy, she was baffled by the focus of the journal, which addressed itself to the formation of a Red–Green alliance against capitalism on the ecology front. What seemed forgotten in the new journal were, we both thought, classically important, if not essential, concerns of Marxism. My interlocutor asked, “Do you think O’Connor has gone crazy?”

She had a point.

Thirty years ago, the Left’s attention was substantially on economic issues in the context of equality and justice. Presently, though, it is impossible to ignore a revolutionary shift in the interests of both the academic Left and the activists, summed up as “political correctness.” As evident not merely in recent issues of *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, the Left now embraces issues of sexuality, gender, ecology and related areas

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for proposed revolutionary change. My friend ascribed the incipient change to mental illness. Some systems of thought can so blind their proponents to the claims of reality that it's tempting to view them as psychopathological, particularly when they are energized with moral or religious zeal. Yet I see this sort of dismissal as recognizably *ad hominem*, too readily available to silence dissenting thought, because I value liberal tolerance, the proper practice of which requires a belief in the rationality of the political opponent.

My own reaction back then to O'Connor's and his colleagues' change of concern was that they were simply opportunists. The opportunity they were looking for was an occasion to gain, exercise, and enjoy power. Nothing in my subsequent reflections, set forward in this essay, decisively refutes this suspicion. I believe the quest for power to be characteristic of many modern political movements. Yet a commitment to equality seems genuine among Left rank-and-file radicals. What motivates an attachment to equality may be more noble than the sheer quest for power along the lines of the Inner Party in *1984* (Orwell [1949] 1981), but it might also be rooted in envy (Schoeck 1969).

I liken the development of the publicly stated ideals of the newest radicals to Friedrich Hayek's (1899–1992) notion of spontaneous order (1960, chap. 4). Popularized systems of political thought evolve like languages: whatever limited and idiosyncratic goals the first practitioners of language might have had, the evolved language now has a life of its own, so much so that the very notion of a founder of a language seems bizarre. Just so, the intellectual seeds sown by the intellectual predecessors of current radicalism were at first appropriated by various popularizing intellectuals and, finally, in that form transmitted to the activists, so that the founding thinkers are all but forgotten. Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), for instance: even his most influential text, "Repressive Tolerance" (Marcuse 1965), is no longer in print. My young colleagues may at best recognize his name, but their attitude toward toleration fits Marcuse's stipulations perfectly.

My thesis is that the new radicalism is a peculiar blend or meeting of at least two traditions—as it were, languages or idioms—of political thought. One tradition speaks in the classic vocabulary of the Enlightenment, emphasizing science, universality, the secular, and reasoned discourse. I argue that this is not the dominant tradition in the new radicalism, nor is the primary instance of it, classical Marxism, unadulterated pure Enlightenment rationalism: Marxism predicates that all thinking is rooted in the subrational, the means and mode of production (Marks and Engels 1978, 4, "Marx on the History of His Opinions"). When it is a matter of strategy, the new radicals are reliant upon at least one classical Marxist: Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). The other tradition informing the new radicalism speaks in the accents of the Counter-Enlightenment: affects and feelings as opposed to structured thought, diversity and individuality rather than the universal. Both of these political idioms share a common vocabulary, *equality*, and a common commitment to the political primacy of equality: for Marx, largely economic equality; for the antirationalist tradition, much more

inclusive equality. Uncovering the sources for these traditions will help us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the newest Left. I first examine the new radicalism in the context of what I judge to be the subordinate tradition, Marxism.

## The Marxist Left

Let me begin by adapting and applying to classical Marxism the distinction Imre Lakatos (1970) makes in his concept of “scientific research programmes”: hardcore conceptual axioms and auxiliary assumptions. Every philosophical or religious system affirms a few essential commitments, the denial of which entails that the denier is not of that philosophical school or that religion. For example, someone calling himself a Hobbesian would not deny the key role of fear in the constitution of the commonwealth if that person understood Thomas Hobbes at all. Persons calling themselves Christian but denying that Jesus Christ ever existed seem not to understand Christianity. Muslims who deny the lordship of Allah or the role of the Prophet would be strange Muslims indeed.

Thus, Marxism, I think, has some hardcore conceptual commitments that distinguish it from other schools of political thinking and that need to be affirmed by an avowed Marxist. A denial of dialectical or indeed any kind of materialism, for instance, would be incompatible with calling oneself a Marxist. Karl Marx (1818–83) indicates what he believes to be the essence of his thinking: that history is the saga of humanity’s technological progress; that each stage of technological production produces social consequences, which he calls the mode of production. Each such mode encompasses antagonistic classes: some owning and others not owning the means of production. Revolution (transition from one mode of production to a newer one) results when a revolutionary, new ruling class, the material force for that liberation, shatters the fetters placed upon production by the current mode and its ruling class. The final such liberation will be universal and herald in the classless society (Marx and Engels 1978, 4–5, “Marx on the History of his Opinions”). The rejection of capitalism results from Marx’s antipathy to what he thinks to be the disastrous consequences of the “anarchy of production.” David Ramsey Steele (1992) judges accurately, I think, this antipathy to the role of the market to be the essence of Marx’s criticism of capitalism. The new mode of production, socialism, necessitates a comprehensively planned society in place of market and money.

Given the volume of Marx’s writings and sufficient time and determination by a partisan, it would be possible to find some quote linking him with green issues or gender issues or even, I guess, identity issues. But the overall thrust of Marx’s theory is to applaud the progressive diminution of the “realm of necessity,” including nature, and the consequent expansion of the “realm of freedom”: human conscious control and comprehensive planning of nature and, of course, society (Marx and Engels 1978, 439–41, “On the Realm of Necessity and the Realm of Freedom”). The growth of technology and the accelerating mechanization of the means of production are crucial

for Marx in preparing the material basis for the new mode of production: socialism. A prominent thinker in the left-wing Hegelian tradition (which includes Marxism), Alexandre Kojève (1902–68), puts it succinctly: “Work sets man against nature. No one would seriously want to defend the interests of Nature against those of man, and in the case of a conflict between them, everybody will automatically side with man against Nature” (2000, 178).

As for gender liberation, consider *Dialogue with Clara Zetkin* by Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924). Clara Zetkin had been working with German female Marxists on issues of sex and marriage. Some German comrades were producing a newspaper aimed at revolutionizing prostitutes, as if they were a special revolutionary class. For Lenin, this project represented a “morbid deviation” from what ought to have been Clara Zetkin’s genuine task: equipping German proletarian women with authentic proletarian class consciousness. The outreach to prostitutes was totally wrongheaded in Lenin’s eyes. He explained, “I want no part of the kind of Marxism which infers all phenomena and all changes in the ideological superstructure directly and blindly from its economic basis, for things are not as simple as all that” (Lenin 1975, 692). The mode of production may have changed, Lenin commented, but that does not entail that all aspects of the superstructure, such as traditional sexual morality, must mechanically change also. “Self-control and self-discipline are not slavery,” he opined, “not in matters of love either” (1975, 694). Among Marxists, Lenin would not be the sole dissident on gender issues and sexual morality. As Paul Gottfried wryly reports regarding the French Communist Party, “Moreover the comments about women and family life heard at party meetings would have befitted a gathering of pre-Vatican Two Catholic prelates” (2005, 2).

Marx never doubted the philosophical centrality of reason, of science, and, politically, the role of the working class as the prime agent for revolutionary change. The new radicalism, contrary to Marx, emphasizes the sacrality of feeling (see, for instance, “microaggression”) and the revolutionary potential of the most marginalized (what Marx would probably characterize as the “lumpen proletariat”). Again, the new radicals do not explicitly call for a new society based on central, comprehensive planning. Perhaps the regulation of market societies without central planning will bring about the envisioned equality. Some major corporations seem to have bought into the mission of the new radicals and even appear to be vanguard actors in the pursuit of environmental issues and social justice, such as encouraging the boycotting of states that do not mandate transgender lavatories. Though the state may encourage and sometimes enforce the new understanding of equality, I believe that governmental action is not ordinarily the initiator of the assault upon classical liberal notions of equality or upon the older morality. Governmental strictures may ultimately force the citizen to adhere to new norms (such as the use of gender-free pronouns, as stipulated in New York City [Volkh 2016]), but such legal actions are generally reactive to governors’ perception of a changed moral or political culture. Ironically, Hayek’s notion of spontaneous order might explain the replacement of older usage by the new politically correct norms, such as those pronouns: no particular actor or actors are responsible for the change.

This new radicalism is solidly a phenomenon of the Left. As Paul Gottfried (2013) has pointed out, the Left is somewhat easily defined: its central political value is equality, however understood. Although the Right may esteem some kinds of equality (before the law, for instance), its central political value is something else, not common to all partisans of the right: liberty or virtue or religion or tradition or nation or sometimes ethnicity or race. The emphasis upon the politically and morally central value of equality is, then, what links this new version of the Left with the traditional perspective of the Left. The pursuit of equality, when initial gross instances of its absence are rectified, leads to more esoteric notions of what that value stipulates. A retreat from social planning may be tactical, or it may entail a real change in goals. The retreat from comprehensive planning has to be at least partially a consequence of the abandonment of the command economy that characterized the Soviet Union and of the abandonment of Maoism by the People's Republic of China. The retreat also is rooted in optimism about Gramsci's "war of position" thesis, which I explore later. Are current demands for social justice simply a way of wounding the old regime until conditions are ripe for pursuing the demands of the older socialism? Yet maybe the aspirations of the older socialism are dead, once and for all. The pursuit of newer variants of egalitarianism perhaps can be achieved through cultural revolution and transformation of the institutions of civil society. If so, we encounter a strategy that envisions Permanent Revolution (apologies to Leon Trotsky) in its uncovering of hitherto unacknowledged inequalities and its demands for eradication of such inequalities. In short, this is not your father's Marxism.

### The Rejection of Reason

In the realm of the varieties of political thought, the new radicalism, I believe, appears closer to fascism than to classical Marxism. If somebody wants to know the basic perspective of classical liberalism, there are foundational thinkers and texts that supply this information: John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1689), for instance. If somebody is investigating the essential affirmations of Marxism, *Capital* (1867) should do the trick. In exploring fascism, in whatever its varieties, no such comprehensive foundational text exists, which is perhaps appropriate for a movement that prefers acting to thinking. For the new radicals likewise, I believe there is no equivalent foundational text, although there may be something like the *Communist Manifesto* in the form of Herbert Marcuse's call to action, "Repressive Tolerance" (1965). Then, again, the lack of a foundational text may not be all that surprising, given the new radicals' preference for act over theory, similar to fascism.

As noted, the praxis of the new radicalism is reactionary. Ernest Nolte (1969) argues that fascism, the bugbear of the radicals, is inconceivable except as a reaction to Marxism, with its parties, youth organizations, demonstrations, security corps, street fighting, and so on. Fascism is, then, not a conservative movement but an expression of counterrevolutionary intent. The new radicalism, in its most publicly visible form, is

itself inconceivable except as a reaction to what its partisans view; it appears almost everywhere as fascism. Clearly, the label *fascist* has a polemical intent in Carl Schmitt's (1888–1985) sense (2007, 31 fn. 12). The labeling effectively silences opposing thought. As a perceptive observer (Ennio Flaiano, 1910–72) put it, there are two kinds of fascists: the fascists and the antifascists (*Wikipedia* n.d.a).

Although, I argue, no foundational text exists for the political correctness radicals, some significant political thinkers from the late-modern period through the end of the twentieth century provided suggestions and arguments presaging or influencing central aspects of the new radicals' vision of the political world and their tactics. I am aware that in significant instances the thinkers I refer to would be almost entirely unsympathetic to the radicals' vision. Rather, I believe, subtle intellectual suggestions produced unintended subsequent ideological consequences. The political correctness advocates' demands for safe (intellectual) space and their emphasis on the privileged position of feeling (a stance antithetical to the intellectual essence of institutions such as the university, although it is now espoused by many of the university's denizens) reflect a rejection of reason and its nourishing conditions, such as freedom of scholarship and discussion. Such a rejection originates in that rejection of classical accounts of human nature begun in the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). I believe the insistence that binary gender identification, notions of normalcy, and even the notion of species are social constructions that individuals are free to reject to be a radicalization of Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) teaching about will. After Rousseau and Nietzsche, I examine Marcuse's rejection of classical tolerance in the context of his serious misunderstanding or misrepresentation and misuse of John Stuart Mill's (1806–73) argument for liberty and his more significant misunderstanding of what tolerance means. Marcuse embodies the anti-Enlightenment disposition of the new radicalism. Finally, I turn to the thought of Antonio Gramsci, an heir to the rationalist Marxist tradition. His distinction between war of position and war of maneuver provides the new radicals with a vision of victory over the prevailing bourgeois (patriarchal, sexist) culture by means of a "long march through the institutions" of civil society.<sup>1</sup>

Political correctness began by frontally assaulting historical linguistic usage and moved into the arena of practice—for instance, successfully replacing the objectionable title *house master* at Harvard with the more acceptable academic nomenclature *faculty dean* (Cunningham, Rodman, and Sabate 2016). I do not expect consistency, but I fear that my tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the master's degree be relabeled because the current name is too reminiscent of slavery might be taken up as a project in the Ivy Halls. On the other hand, correctness loses meaning when all is dropped down the memory hole: If we do not recall fascism or slavery, what is the struggle about? A movement built

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1. The Socialist German Student Union activist (and practicing Lutheran, to boot) Rudi Dutschke appears to have coined this phrase based on Chairman Mao Zedong's strategic retreat (*Wikipedia* n.d.c; see also Marcuse 2014, 336).

upon reaction would seem to have no identity once its aim is accomplished, once the object of reaction is annihilated. Will quarrels about the meaning of equality be enough to keep left radicalism from devolving into the patter of Nietzsche's Last Man? As Aristotle observed, communities united solely by the goal of military victory fall apart once complete success is secured on the battlefield (1984, 1271b1–11).

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The rejection of reason by the activists of the current radicalism may have deep historical roots, but its present form is indebted to those intellectual rebels who took up a struggle against the Enlightenment. Anybody who has taken an introductory course in philosophy knows that for both the ancient and early-modern thinkers, an essential feature of the human animal is the faculty of reason, although they may add other modifiers, such as *political* or *social*. Aristotle goes so far as to affirm that human beings, as naturally linguistic, are by nature rational as well as political (1984, 1253a9–15). Thomas Hobbes may deny that reason is a gift of nature as opposed to a capability human beings have created along with language, but he nevertheless insists that reason is the most important, if not characteristic, trait distinguishing humans from other animals ([1651] 1994, chap. 5, sec. 6). Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the first major modern philosopher to reject the centrality of reason in his account of human nature. Accepting the goal of his intellectual predecessors, the articulation of the human state of nature, Rousseau denies that any of them actually succeeded in discovering the nonteleological pure state of nature ([1750/1755] 1964, 102). Hobbes, for instance, imports teleology into his account of the state of nature: nature may not have intended human beings to speak or to reason, but nature has set things up so that the human exit from the state of nature seems a consequence of natural purpose. For Hobbes, human beings get pleasure from inflicting pain on others of their kind ([1651] 1994, chap. 13, sec. 4–5): not naturally social, we do exhibit a naturally antisocial sociability.

Rousseau, to arrive at what he believes to be a defensible account of the state of nature, shies away from disputable philosophical doctrines, such as free will, and bases his conclusions on evidence discoverable by science. More exactly, he applies to primitive human beings lessons he infers from the data of comparative anatomy. Carnivorous mammals lack a colon and have incisor teeth and, in the female, multiple teats. Herbivores, on the contrary, possess the colon and have flat teeth and, in the female, few teats. For Rousseau, from the perspective of comparative anatomy, human beings are more like cows than like cats in their natural beginnings. Human beings are a special kind of cow: we do not belong in a herd. We are never really happy whenever we depend on our fellows for our well-being: vanity, jealousy, envy attest to that. In the natural state, human beings are free, equal, independent, not social. "Therefore it is not so much understanding which constitutes the distinction of man from the animals as it is his being a free agent" ([1750/1755] 1964, 114). The freedom alluded to is better understood as self-perfectibility: as a species and as individuals, we have no set nature,



but rather we successfully adapt to changes in both the natural and the historical/cultural environment.

Prior to the acquisition of reason, human beings are driven not only by the desire to survive and survive well but also by a repulsion arising from seeing any other being suffer, especially our fellow human beings. This faculty Rousseau calls pity ([1750/1755] 1964, 130). This primitive human being remembers nothing, expects nothing, but enjoys the feeling of his mere existence in the present. Rousseau refers to this state of complete abandonment to the present in one of his autobiographical works, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* ([1782] 1992). He relates that after a disastrous collision with a large Great Dane, he awoke from an unconscious state with no memory of who he was. The blood pouring from his injuries he viewed with no apprehension: it differed not from some stream of water. “I felt,” he records, “a rapturous calm in my whole being; and each time I remember it, I find nothing comparable to it in all the activity of known pleasures” (16).

This is as close as Rousseau, or any civilized human being, could have gotten to experiencing something like the first human beings’ pure enjoyment of the mere sense of existence. Something akin to this sense of timeless absorption in the present Rousseau later on enjoyed at St. Peter’s Island in Switzerland while lying still in a boat or sitting near the water ([1782] 1992, 68–69). For Rousseau, the moral obligation to one’s fellow human beings is to do them no harm (as opposed to doing them good, which requires effort and pain). That obligation arises “less because [the human] is a reasonable being than because he is a sensitive being” ([1750/1755] 1964, 96). But we share that sensitivity with nonhuman animals. It follows that we have obligations toward those animals as well: that is, not to do them harm.

The important link between Rousseau and the new radicals rests upon his elevation of the importance of feelings. Speech, related to reason, in Rousseau’s mind is something less natural than feeling. His heirs reason, then, that if a conflict were to arise between exercising free speech and possibly causing injury to somebody’s feelings by exercising free speech, the preservation of unoffended feeling takes precedence. According to the political correctness partisans, the elimination of all instances of perceived offences to feelings, such as “triggering” events and “microaggressive” speech, is most effectively executed if individuals police themselves, censoring the thoughts that precede verbal enactment.

## Friedrich Nietzsche

According to political correctness norms, one way to violate the apparent right of some other to uninjured feelings is by using gender-free pronouns. Every person has the right, it is stipulated—sometimes enforced by academia, sometimes by the law—to be addressed by the pronoun of that person’s choice. Reality would seem to be malleable, if not optional: the line itself between convention and nature seems conventional. The self’s self-definition, regardless of whether others validate it or not, is the paramount

concern. If the others do not validate that self-definition, it is wrong for them to refuse to do so. The roots of such subjectivism are, I believe, nourished in Nietzschean soil.

If Aristotle views the human being as a rational animal, if Rousseau judges the essence of human nature as sensitivity, Nietzsche defines us as the metaphor-making species. Language is composed of words; words are verbalizations of images; and images appear to be the effect of the stimulation of the nervous system. To assume that such stimulation reveals anything about the nature of an external cause for it is already an act of faith. “It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, color, snow, and flowers: and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (Nietzsche [1873] 1989).

Life requires an ability to forget that all knowledge involves metaphor and that the objective truth about the world and about an apparently indifferent cosmos is a deadly one. Life requires the capacity both to remember and to forget (Nietzsche [1876] 1980, 8–9). Love, for instance, views the lover as unique, but that uniqueness is questionable. It requires that the lover repress the memory of previous loves as well as the truth that all love ends in something seemingly tragic—say, death. Life requires a judicious balancing of remembering and forgetting. Without memory, love would be quite simply blind. Life requires that the expectant mother forget the stories she has heard about the pains of childbirth or repress her own memories of previous births. The child who has burned a finger may remember too much the pain and never go near a flame again or forget the pain and invite future sufferings.

The metaphors of individual experience become the life-affirming myths of the tribe. But for such myths to be effective, it is necessary that we forget that they are only comforting tales, only myths, only metaphors. Such tales tell us more, of course, about the storyteller than about the way the world is (Nietzsche [1876] 1980, 35–36). The quest for historical truth, such as whether accident reigns, is always expressive of the questor’s needs. For Nietzsche, the historian may be serving a need for inspiring great deeds or for conserving a tradition or for correcting injustice. But an objective history would do none of these things: it would confine itself to what can be stated mathematically ([1876] 1980, 35). All decent historians, no doubt, stay within the parameters of what can be stated with certainty: the events of 1492, for instance. But what is of vital interest to the historian would be the significance of those events, their interpretation: the character of Columbus, the intent of the Inquisition. Interpretation adds to what we can confidently assert about things lying below the explicit surface. Thus, I think, for Nietzsche, the division between the skilled historian and the skilled writer of historical novels is a fluid boundary.

It is not only in the art of the historian that Nietzsche finds that personal values triumph over the pursuit of truth. The other cultural boast of modernity, science, in the shape of physics, reveals itself as not explanatory of the world but as interpretative of that world (Nietzsche [1886] 1966, 21). All interpretations are in the service of the (subjective) values of the interpreter. So, stipulates Nietzsche, “only by forgetting that

he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency” ([1873] 1989). Now that “God is dead,” for Nietzsche the truly creative artist crafts for himself or herself a personal myth, fully recognizing both its distance from truth as well as its necessity to render that artist’s life meaningful. Only the highest soul is capable of such creativity. Nietzsche’s vision is surely aristocratic.

What we see in terms of the new radicals’ attempt to defy nature, to create a personal identity defiant of nature’s strictures, is, I believe, a democratic appropriation of Nietzsche in a direction that I doubt he would approve. Nietzsche’s creative artist, for instance, whatever degree of tranquility he or she might achieve, suffers greatly from loneliness: the air is quite thin at that level of striving. Nietzsche admits some natural limits to creative self-identification ([1886] 1966, 45). The individual is not free to create if he or she lacks the will to power. But the new radicals do not believe in any such limit to self-identification, at least in the sphere of gender (as opposed to, say, race). All such self-identification requires, by law or social pressure, is that the rest of us be obliged to validate such self-identification. The philosophy of the antidemocratic Nietzsche, suitably bowdlerized, has become subordinated to most extreme egalitarian ends.

The dominant place of will in self-identification is evident in the social thought of Karl Mannheim (1893–1947). For Mannheim, every ideology (whether conservatism, liberalism, or fascism) is neither true nor false but more or less useful to a class as an expression of that class’s interests. Belief in the truth of an ideology—that a class’s interests are good for society as a whole, for instance—is a not a conscious lie told by the adherent of an ideology but a form of self-deception. How to correct such deception? Mannheim’s answer is the university (1954, 155–56).

In the university, the young from all classes mix socially and intellectually. The brightest among them are led to see that the ideology that shapes their worldview is different from that which informs the outlook of their fellow students from different social classes, that no such outlook simply sets forward political truth, and that all political arguments are class-interested ones. Those who learn this lesson about the relativity of political truth compose yet another class, but one seemingly and oddly without a class interest of its own: the intellectuals. The lesson of relativity learned, the intellectual may opt out of political action altogether. Or the intellectual may decide to be politically involved, but in that case he or she is not free to create, in Nietzsche’s sense, some new ideology. According to Mannheim, all that is now available to the intellectual is a commitment to one of the existing ideologies, but in his or her full consciousness of its irrational, intellectual unjustifiable core beliefs (1954, 158). The act of commitment, rather than thinking, becomes the hallmark of the political intellectual, and only to committed thinking does the committed thinking of the political opponent become intelligible. Thus, the intellectual stance of the fascist (if we can call Mannheim’s depiction of the fascist such) becomes the template for intellectual political partisans of all stripes: what is important is willed affirmation of a cause in full knowledge of that cause’s irrationality.

## Herbert Marcuse

The mere arrogance of an opposed elite need not be the prelude for a setback to the cause of liberty. However, if that elite is of the mind that there is only one side to every political issue and that those otherwise minded must be silenced, then the time has come for the nonelite to take serious note. Herbert Marcuse's essay "Repressive Tolerance" (1965) is the first explicit invitation by a philosopher to a militant cadre to abandon the classical liberal principle of tolerance. Marcuse belongs more to the Counter-Enlightenment than he does to the more rationalist classical Marxist position. He believes (borrowing from but not admitting, for political reasons, his indebtedness to Martin Heidegger [1889–1976]) that the Western philosophical tradition has identified itself with Logos: the principle of categorization, domination, manipulation, and repression. Marcuse conceals Heidegger's criticism of the Western philosophical tradition under a radicalized version of Freud's psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> That tradition, in behalf of its commitment to Logos, has repressed Eros in particular: the principle of receptivity and pleasure (which Marcuse seems to identify as the truly rational [1966, 124–25]). In the struggle between Eros and Logos, according to Marcuse, Logos ought to be the loser.

According to Marcuse, the historical period subsequent to World War II is one of "clear and present danger" (1965, 109). Tolerance of political speech coming from the parties of the Right is an open invitation to the rebirth of fascism. Free political speech in favor of conservative causes, given the dangerous nature of the times, is akin to shouting "fire" in a crowded theater (1965, 109). Marcuse may be the first theorist to imply that all dissent from a progressive program reveals the dissenter as an incipient or disguised fascist.

Tolerance was in the past, according to Marcuse, progressive: a partisan defense of progressive minorities against the repression of some overwhelming homogeneous majority. John Stuart Mill, as a prime example, argued for the liberal virtue of tolerance in all possible scenarios: where the prevailing orthodoxy is in error, where the majority's opinion is a mixture of both truth and falsity, and even when the dominant opinion is substantially true. After all, permission for the expression of an intellectual error prompts those holding correct beliefs to recall the arguments made for the truth. In the absence of that recollection, the espousal of even true beliefs can be a mere exercise in reciting some catechism (Mill [1859] 1978, 50). At present, however, according to Marcuse, tolerance has become simply a refusal to take sides. He calls this "pure" tolerance the object of his criticism (1965, 85). For Marcuse, "certain things cannot be said, certain policies cannot be proposed, certain behavior cannot be permitted without making tolerance an instrument for the continuation of servitude" (1965, 88). The policies at issue are not, say, the naked advocacy of genocide. Rather, those policies he

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2. An astute student of mine, Elizabeth D. Petry, argued that because Heidegger would have been an embarrassing source of inspiration for Marcuse, rather than wedding Heidegger's ontology to Freud, Marcuse substituted a politicized Freud for that ontology.

alludes to are the ones espoused by those whom he sees as the Right. Nor are there, according to Marcuse, at least two sides to every public issue. “I maintain,” he says, “that there are issues where there is no ‘other side’ in any more than a formalistic sense, or where the ‘other side’ is demonstratively ‘regressive’ and impedes possible improvement of the human condition” (1965, 120). It may be too late when these regressive opinions are voiced in the public square. These opinions must be silenced well before there is any question of their leading to implementation, to action. It is imperative to exercise “intolerance even towards thought, opinion, and word”—intolerance, that is, “towards the self-styled conservatives, to the political Right” (1965, 110).

Yet the “Right” for Marcuse are not merely “self-styled conservatives” but seem to include the bulk of the inhabitants of contemporary capitalist society. The all-pervasive power of the one-dimensional affluent society we live in drowns out critical thinking through its control of the communication media and the educational system (1965, 95).<sup>3</sup> So, Marcuse stipulates, the vast majority of society, from the elite classes to the proletariat, are in a condition of having been brainwashed. Language itself, by way of philosophies such as positivism and by way of the seduction of advertising, no longer can serve as an instrument for progressive liberation. Marcuse judges that “[u]niversal toleration becomes questionable when its rationale no longer prevails, where tolerance is administered to manipulated and indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinions of their masters, for whom heteronomy has become autonomy” (1965, 90). Toleration of freedom of political expression is warranted only when the discussion is, in Marcuse’s term, “rational”: engaged in by individuals free from manipulation and indoctrination. Almost none of the denizens of affluent capitalist society meets these standards. Free expression of ideas requires an individual free from indoctrination, whose mind is essentially a blank slate. For there to exist such autonomous individuals, someone must create an entirely new, liberated society. “In other words,” says Marcuse, “freedom is still to be created even for the freest of the existing societies” (1965, 87).

To quote an expert, “What is to be done?” Ordinary checks and balances, or James Madison’s “multiplicity of interests” and religious sects, will not prevent a tyrannical majority from coalescing or repressing the progressive few.<sup>4</sup> Rather, indoctrination must counteract indoctrination: “progressive indoctrination” must negate “regressive indoctrination,” just as revolutionary violence negates reactionary violence (Marcuse 1965, 93). Freedom of thought must be either restored or, more probably, for the first time established in ways that “may necessitate new and rigid restrictions on teachings

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3. Marcuse intimately knew whereof he wrote. He was no stranger to the inner apparatus of the American state or to the use of indoctrinating propaganda. During World War II, having immigrated to the United States, he was employed by the Office of War Information and later by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessors to the Central Intelligence Agency. He served as a senior analyst for the OSS Central European section, and when the OSS was abolished in 1945, he served as the head of the U.S. State Department’s Central European Bureau (“Herbert Marcuse” 2013; *Wikipedia* n.d.b).

4. See Madison [1787–88] 1961, *Federalist Papers* nos. 10 and 51.

and practices in the educational institutions” (Marcuse 1965, 100). The manipulated students in existing universities, argues Marcuse, must be countermanipulated: “unless the student learns to think in the opposite direction, he will be inclined to place the facts into the predominant framework of values. . . . Here too, in the education of those not yet maturely integrated, in the mind of the young, the ground for liberating tolerance is yet to be created” (1965, 113). So, again, what is to be done politically? Because only one side of the political argument is valid, it would not be sufficient to equalize the influence of the Left and the Right. No: “Not ‘equal’ but *more* representation of the Left would be equalization of the prevailing inequality” (Marcuse 1965, 119). That is Marcuse’s penultimate advice. His final judgment: tolerance must be withdrawn entirely from the expression of political opinion characteristic of the Right (1965, 120).

Few there are who have escaped the false “happy” consciousness of the dominant majority. How they managed to liberate themselves from the juggernaut of established opinion is not anything Marcuse makes clear. The hermeneutic circle is here at its vicious worst: the conditions for a tolerant society have yet to be created, but only such a society can create those liberated men and women who will be autonomous enough in their thinking and values to create the conditions for that free society; only if those few can impose their liberating vision upon most of the rest can the possibility of a “subversive majority,” the new free society, emerge. The argument, Marcuse admits, sounds essentially “elitist,” and he ponders the legitimacy of some sort of progressive dictatorship, reflecting upon the choice between Plato’s educational dictatorship and the dictatorship of “free men,” which Marcuse associates with John Stuart Mill. As he reflects, “The problem is not that of an educational dictatorship, but that of breaking the tyranny of public opinion and its makers in the closed society” (1965, 106). He chooses against dictatorship, but his choice is not convincing to me or even, perhaps, to Marcuse himself. Stale habit or the desire not to lose some of his potential allies, I believe, may account for his hesitant opting for a democratic solution to the dictatorship of the one-dimensional society. After all, he thinks, whatever the ideological facade, we are already living in a dictatorship anyway. So only a dictatorship of the small elite can hope to achieve such a transvaluation of values in the context of such overwhelming opposition. Where is the instrument for such a revolution? “The tolerance which is the life element of a free society, will never be the gift of the powers that be; it can, under the prevailing conditions of tyranny by the majority, only be won in the sustained effort of radical minorities,” minorities that Marcuse describes as “intolerant, militantly intolerant” (1965, 123).

It seems to me nonsense to imply that we can be tolerant of those with whom we agree. Only those with whom I have some disagreement may be the recipient of my toleration. But in today’s idiom, on the contrary, “toleration” implies agreement with, if not fervent public endorsement of a political or moral position. Marcuse asserts, “Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left” (1965, 109). So who is Marcuse inviting to be tolerant in his sense of progressive tolerance? If it is the political majority,

then he faces a theoretical as well as a rhetorical difficulty in what he is advocating: a theoretical difficulty because, given his depiction of the brainwashed majority, it would seem impossible by argument alone to get such a majority to change its mind. This majority is, consciously or not, objectively the enemy, the “Right”; a rhetorical difficulty because Marcuse gives no reason for the majority to submit to reindoctrination or to tolerate the actions of his militant, intolerant minority. In order to be to any degree successful, that minority will have to resort to violence. Toward whom will the militant, intolerant minority be tolerant? Not toward the Right, of course. Maybe toward the Left? Yet that militant minority *is* the Left, and you cannot be tolerant toward yourself, I have argued. So the entire virtue of toleration gets dismissed, with the intention of “Repressive Tolerance” as a whole being the praise of intolerance and a more or less open invitation to violence (but, of course, of the correct kind: “revolutionary violence”). But if such a small revolutionary faction were to take the “long march through the institutions” and were then enabled to use the media to countermanipulate, then it would be able to practice intolerance toward any dissenting point of view—that is, that of the Right—with little cost. A combination of “revolutionary violence” and media-supported intolerance would effectively seal the direction of the public agenda toward radical equality.

Although Marcuse wishes to clothe himself in the mantle of John Stuart Mill, he does not grasp—or pretends not to grasp—the heart of Mill’s argument for liberty. On the surface, it seems that Marcuse is wedded to Mill’s defense of liberty in its historical context. For Marcuse, the times and context have essentially changed. But have they? Were Mill and his classical liberal allies “autonomous” actors whose values were not indoctrinated and whose access to the facts were unimpeded by indoctrination? As far as I can grasp, only the denizens of Marcuse’s liberated society, yet to be created, can claim to be such. For Marcuse, liberty of discussion can be justified only in the context of such a society of autonomous human beings, free from prejudices, opinions, and passionate attachment to such opinions. Their minds are empty receptacles, having no previous presuppositions to contemplate, to correct, or to depart from. Mill, in contrast, does not believe in wiping the slate clean of all previous opinions. For Mill, to model the mind as a blank slate ignores the flesh-and-blood recipients of the benefits of freedom of political, moral, and religious discussion. Mill takes human beings as we are, especially emphasizing our fallibility. Liberty, then, can be of benefit to imperfect human beings living in less than perfect societies as a means to correct false or only partially correct opinions or as a way of escaping subscription to true beliefs in a zombielike fashion. In Marcuse’s yet uncreated liberated society, in contrast, why would we need liberty to discuss issues apart from, perhaps, purely scientific ones? If there is only one justifiable side to a political or moral issue, then freedom of discussion is not only unnecessary but morally objectionable.

## Antonio Gramsci

From the perspective of “Repressive Tolerance,” the only strategy of the progressive minority must be a sustained, violent encounter with the all-pervasive system, whose contemporary nickname might be “the Matrix.” The impossibility of an enlightened dictatorship by the militant few drives the essay to this conclusion. But what if it were possible for that minority to hijack the Matrix? Enter Antonio Gramsci and his “war of position.”

The new radicals seem divided between those committed to peaceful protest and those committed to more decisive action. I believe that both factions treat reality as something optional or dispensable, something to be ignored or negated. Yet the ideology supported by these ground troops does possess a theory of social change, the inheritance of classical Marxism, very much in touch with the real. Like-minded intellectuals, as I indicated earlier, have adopted the main thrust of Antonio Gramsci’s reflection on revolutionary change. They have crafted a strategy for cultural change that involves a patient “long march through the institutions.” The target, equality, remains the sole unchangeable entity. Tactics are essentially malleable.

Gramsci positions his political theory within the “philosophy of praxis.” That philosophy is clearly derived from Marx but indebted greatly to Lenin. By calling it “praxis,” Gramsci implies that the project encompasses both theory and revolutionary practice. He thinks it to be a mistake to be mechanical in understanding the Marxist notion of the mode of production, however decisive in the ultimate sense the economic infrastructure may be. Gramsci likens the mode of production to the skeleton and anatomy of an animal, essential for understanding what sort of a creature it is. But that is not to say that the skin or hair of the animal is only an illusion. Just so, the components of the superstructure are not merely derivative from the economic base. Just so, a woman’s skeleton is the supporting framework for her body, but her beauty is not derived solely from her skeleton, though, no doubt, it contributes to what is charming in her movements. If I love her, it is more than the skeleton that is the object of my attention (Gramsci 2000, 197). Features of the superstructure, such as public controversies, need not be necessarily connected, directly or indirectly, with a given mode of production.<sup>5</sup> Just as Lenin stipulated in his exchange with Clara Zetkin that not all the aspects of the superstructure need or would change when the socialist mode of production replaces the capitalistic one, so Gramsci asserts that social practices begun under a previous mode of production do not lose their utility or truth when that mode is superseded (2000, 190).

Gramsci finds much in the realm of religion worthy of Marxist reflection and imitation. He finds particularly of interest the popular religious beliefs and practices of

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5. As an historical instance, according to Gramsci it would be silly to deduce the major theological dispute that divided the eastern and western church, the Filioque (that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son) clause added to the Creed of Nicaea, from the economic infrastructure prevailing at the time of the Great Schism (2000, 191–92).



both East and West, but especially those of Roman Catholicism. Religion and folkways generally are not just lies imposed upon the ruled by the ruling classes. Rather, they are reflections of both the healthiness and the limitations of “common sense.” “The relation between common sense and the upper level of philosophy is assured by ‘politics’ just as it is politics that assures the relationship between the Catholicism of the intellectuals and that of the simple” (2000, 332). By “the simple,” Gramsci means the workers, the uneducated, the masses. He feels that the strategy of the Roman Church limits the public beliefs of its intellectuals more or less to the level of the popular, lowest-common-denominator expositions of the faith. The strategy of the practitioners of the praxis philosophy should be the opposite: to raise the intellectual level of the working masses to that of its advanced theorists, to create for the proletarians a culture that counters that of the given hegemonic block (330, 333). At certain times and under some historical circumstances, religious beliefs are a matter of necessity for the masses: a way of conceptually organizing and rationalizing their world, a framework for practical activity (337). It is not the sophisticated Catholicism of the Jesuits that Gramsci is referring to, which he labels a narcotic (337). Rather, it is the native Catholicism of the uneducated laity: “Free from the flux of speculation which weakens the soul with doubt, and illuminated by immortal principles, man felt his hopes reborn: sure that a superior force was supporting him in the struggle against Evil, he did violence to himself and conquered the world,” Gramsci approvingly quotes from *La Civiltà Cattolica* (337).

According to Gramsci, two errors emerge from a rigid derivation of revolutionary strategy from a specific mode of production. One mistake is resistance to any revolutionary action until the ultimate crisis in the mode of production reveals itself. This error is that of the theorists of “Economism” (2000, 213–14). But Leon Trotsky’s international Permanent Revolution theory is equally mechanical. The second error attempts to transfer revolutionary strategies (“war of maneuver,” for instance) that succeed in one context to quite a different terrain, ignoring the specific context wherein the mode of production operates: for instance, an attempt to simply transfer Bolshevik strategy from the backward arena of Russia to the terrain of the advanced West (2000, 221, 237).

The “war of maneuver” concept is, of course, derived from military tactics (Gramsci 2000, 226). In its pure form, it entails the besiegement of the armed enemy. In political terms, it refers to a direct assault upon the class enemy’s state. It supposes that the state has some independence from the rest of the superstructure—that is, civil society. Where civil society is weak and the state relatively strong, as in the instance of the Bolshevik October Revolution, such a strategy may be successful. But where civil society is vibrant, flourishing, its institutions act as ditches and battlements protective of the state (229). Such a scenario requires the tactics of a “war of position” (226). Civil society must piece by piece, institution by institution be occupied by the revolutionary class. The components of civil society are what produce and propagandize a hegemonic culture. To occupy those components (the press, for instance, or the schools) means to have at hand the tools for crafting and advancing the proletarian counterculture. That,

according to Gramsci, is the appropriate path for revolutionary success in the West: the “long march through the institutions.” The intellectuals organically connected with the working class thus will wage a culture war against the prevailing bourgeois values (304, 330, 333, 395). If the revolution is successfully fought, the collapse of the state is at hand. Capture how the public thinks, what it values, and government, having no independent values of its own, merely reinforces by legislation what is already adhered to by its citizens.

This seems, in part, descriptive of what is going on in, say, America. On any particular issue (sexism, gender, environmentalism, and so on), the political leaders only “lead” when it is clear to them which way the cultural wind is blowing. For instance, regarding, say, same-sex marriage or transgender lavatories, presidents, senators, and congresspersons have made remarkable reversals of their earlier positions. They wait, I think, to see what the important editorial pages are advocating or what the progressive corporate elite are mandating. When all becomes clear, the informal enforcement of new norms (generally about equality) are buttressed by legal penalties, in most cases no longer absolutely needed. Deviation from those new norms involves social ostracism, if not the loss of a career. Importantly, as Angelo Codevilla (2016) and Paul Gottfried (2005) argue, the new culture is not only different from the prevailing social values of “the masses” but quite at odds with them. No, it is not simply at odds with them: the cultural elites are transparently contemptuous of the prior “mode of production” on the level of culture and values.

Gramsci, as I indicate earlier, is not entirely comfortable with the simple faith of the religious believer, but he goes so far as to claim that the common sense of such believers means that they are already “philosophers,” at least embryonically (2000, 325). But the contemporary followers (they believe) of Gramsci reserve their highest contempt precisely for the religious believers, especially those so unfortunate as to be branded “fundamentalists.” Such contempt cannot, I think, effectively accomplish Gramsci’s desire to accommodate, while elevating to a more sophisticated level the “commonsense” beliefs and values of the nonelite electorate. The cultural elite and their political acolytes would rather resort to signaling their virtues—that is, their distance from the old values and their “uneducated” adherents—than assume responsibility for their, say, electoral mistakes or exhibit humility. And hoping that I am not beating a dead horse, I must note that singularly missing among the virtues of the elite, especially in academia (and, perhaps, in the leadership of the churches), is courage. It requires little courage, for instance, for university presidents to advocate the latest political fad. Yet even university alumni appear unwilling or unable to dissent from the pontifical pronouncements made by academic leaders.

## Conclusion

The radical political agenda set before the body politic is one centered upon radical, novel understandings of equality. Because the possession of reason can be taken as an indication of inequality, the progressive radicals, along the lines of Rousseau,

emphasize feeling instead of thinking. Because nature poses an obstacle to the radical project, Nietzsche's concept of will to power as a source of self-definition, identity politics, offers an intellectual justification for assaulting traditional categories of gender, health, species, and so on under the stigmas of "sexism," "ableism," "speciesism," and so on (granted, the activists do not seem to care much about intellectual justification). Marcuse's manifesto has undermined general commitment to liberty of thought and speech, especially in academia and among organizations traditionally committed to the defense of toleration of unorthodox points of view. How different the status of freedom of speech is now for the cultural elite, say, from what it was no more than a half-century ago demonstrates both the fragility of such freedom and the fickleness of the elites. Gramsci provides a strategy for political success: the war of position, the long march through the institutions. Though I am convinced that the cultural elites' ignoring of Gramsci's policy of not offending the simple beliefs of potential revolutionary masses is a mistake that generates tangible resistance to their project, they have nevertheless made significant successful assaults upon middle-class (bourgeois) culture.

The question I pondered earlier in this essay asked whether the politics of "the rainbow" is here to stay or simply a transitional strategy until the culture is ripe for a return to a Red agenda of centralized economic planning. Governmental regulation has enforced norms of equality far beyond the dreams of Edward Bellamy or Marx or Lenin. I believe, though, that the government is not the prime mover in this realm. The elite is correct: control of the moral and political culture effectively creates a scenario where, under fear of loss of employment or fear of character defamation, independent thinkers become difficult to find. Is what drives the elite a love of equality or of something else—say, power? That new culture envisions all kinds of equality well beyond, as I said, the economic. "Equality" appears to behave like an ever-mutating malign cell in the civic community. In addition, key economic actors and institutions are committed to those novel equality norms. The struggle continues against the various species of the genus inequality, some based on gender, some based on disabilities, some challenging the privileged status of the human species itself. Given the fecundity of the human imagination, can a society ever achieve the elimination of all such perceived injustice? Is this, then, a "permanent revolution," keeping the dissatisfied perpetually busy? As some solace to those who are not enthusiastic about current projects and future directions, the culture war that is being fought is not directed solely against liberty in its varied manifestations, something I hold as of primary political value. Rather, the culture war seems to me and to others to be a war against human nature. If so, it will ultimately not be successful. But what costs may have to be borne by dissidents (loss of employment, defamation of character, ostracism, silencing of conscience) before common sense eventually prevails?

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